

**By Robert Ziegler, ISDA Director of Communications**

Indiana farmers have a tremendous resource available to them that can work both to satisfy resource management needs on their property and to boost their economic bottom line.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, as the program name suggests, is an addendum to the very popular Conservation Reserve Program, a federally-administered effort to preserve soil and water quality on ecologically sensitive, privately-owned land.

CREP is a joint federal and state program, with the state portion of the program administered by the Indiana State Department of Agriculture's Division of Soil Conservation.

Gina Sheets, Director of the Indiana State Department of Agriculture, said CREP fits in with the overall philosophy of the state when it comes to encouraging sound conservation practices.

"CREP is a good example of government coming alongside the hard-working producer with incentive and guidance, rather than a demand," Sheets said. "Our staff does a good job of helping Indiana producers see how they can make sound and science-based conservation practices work toward an improved bottom line. This fits in very well with our department mission of increasing economic opportunities and promoting land resource management without adding a heavy layer of government interference in private operations."

The means by which CREP enhances the CRP is multi-faceted. CREP provides additional revenue to the landowner, both from additional support by the federal government and a one-time payment by the state. With tighter eligibility restrictions than the broader CRP program, CREP payments incentivize further diligence in reducing nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment runoff from land to water.

The one-time state payment is not insignificant. Up to \$950 per acre is available for payout depending on the type of conservation practices being utilized in the designated land area. Wetlands restoration is the highest category in terms of payment amount, but other practices, such as bottom line tree planting, can still mean \$450 an acre (or more) to the landowner.

Logan Garner, Program Manager for Water Quality Initiatives of ISDA's Division of Soil Conservation, said the enrollment of more than 8,000 acres in the program statewide indicates a growing interest in the conservation practices it encourages.

"All the CREP practices are generally edge of field," Garner said. "It's not something that hinders farming. We find the people who join are interested in these practices. It's indicative of farmers' changing attitudes toward being stewards of the land."

Land eligible for CREP enrollment is also limited to one of 11 designated watersheds, which cover approximately 2/3 of the state.

Garner said rising corn prices sometimes can be a challenge to CREP enrollment, but reiterated that the program is designed to work both for the long-term well being of the land, as well as the producer's bottom line (while noting that these two attractions are not at cross purposes)

"Our field staff continues working with farmers on ways they can get the most out of these practices," Garner continued. "Most of them are in it because they are looking at long-term viability of land and soil. They want their kids to bear the fruit of this land, literally and figuratively. CREP is something to help insure the value of topsoil on your land and the water around it. We're lucky in Indiana that a lot of people do feel that way. We find there are a lot of responsible stewards of the land in Indiana."

The program is administered by ISDA along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency.

Garner said that the CREP staff tracks every project through a software model developed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Indiana Department of Environmental Management. The program is able to predict how much of a load reduction (for nitrogen, phosphorous and sediment) will take place.

"The positive impact of the programs is very quantifiable, and we see more each year how much the program and the conservation methods can work," he said. "I think it's clear that the positive impact on water quality will also be seen more and more as time goes on."

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